

Flawless Execution

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If her technique had only been faultless that day.

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Chapter 1

She kneels and begins anew.

She draws the sword, the Shimofuri Masamune, with a precision born of solitude and lonely Sunday afternoons. It's heavier than Bakuzan, and it doesn't move like an extension of her own body, but it's old, very old, and the age is comforting and strangely familiar.

In the family training hall, with its fraying scrolls of watercolors and calligraphy, the floor creaks as she steps up and forward. With each repetition she changes something; she opens her stance a little, moves faster, strikes more broadly.

With each repetition she tries to find the single point of perfection that she lacked once before.

The pattern is "Yanagi" - The Willow - the final *kata* of Kiryuin Shintōryū. But there are no ranks in this *dojo*, no one to examine her technique and declare it worthy or not. Her only guide is what her muscles tell her as she remembers that afternoon, the afternoon that she gathered her forces and laid bare her treachery.

She closes the distance to her mother faster this time. She swings earlier. Her sword moves effortlessly in perfect separation: daughter from mother, head from neck.

The blood is a cascade, rapids of metallic red, and as it matts in her hair and stains Junketsu crimson, she feels clean, purged, for the first time in twelve years.

Her mother dies instantly: light leaving her eyes as she watches her own body crumple and crumple in the distance, rainbows fading to grey like a clouded prism. Cruel fingers never hold a still-beating heart aloft, and those lips never say the words that can't be rewound now.

And so she and Matoi - and the name is always "Matoi" because "Ryuko" is the girl that visits at weekends who says her grades are improving and that she's trying out for the rowing team, and who hugs her with the unfamiliar warmth of sibling affection - she and Matoi are still rivals for a while, and then friends and after that something more, but never sisters.

And Sunday afternoons aren't so lonely, at least for a while.

She kneels and begins anew.

But she knows it would never have worked.